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Deposited in DRO:

01 February 2013

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Rizk, R. and Gregory, S. (2010) 'Esh added value : a case study in indigenous corporate social responsibility.', in A handbook on corporate governance and social responsibility. Farnham, England: Gower Applied Research, pp. 653-664. Corporate social responsibility.

Further information on publisher's website:

http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9780566088179

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

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CHAPTER 38

Esh Added Value: A Case Study in Indigenous Corporate Social Responsibility

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Introduction

Esh Group is one of the largest construction groups operating in the North East of England. Their headquarters are situated within a few miles of their original home in the village of Esh Winning, County Durham, with numerous offices throughout the North East region and Leeds.

Strongly committed to the local economy and the community which provides its direct workforce, 'modern-day' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity has been on the company's agenda since its inception over three decades ago. The company has always had an active policy of procurement in the North East and adjacent regions, recognising the impact this has on the local economy, the natural environment and its own bottom line. With increased interest and awareness in corporate responsibility and citizenship from a variety of stakeholder groups, 'Esh Added Value', the Group's collection of varied and innovative community schemes, have gained notoriety and strategic importance.

This unique case study chronicles the CSR journey of a home grown Small and Medium-sized Business (SME). Data has been compiled from a number of corporate documents and communications as well as interviews conducted with senior personnel at Esh Group, providing a rare look into the motivations, expectations and experiences of a local organisation on the road to sustainable development.

THE REGION

The North-East of England is one of the nine official regions of England and comprises the combined area of Northumberland, County Durham, Tyne and Wear and Tees Valley.

* The authors gratefully acknowledge the access granted to employees, resources and facilities at Esh Group and the financial support of the Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) through the Knowledge Transfer Partnership scheme, without either of which, this project would not have been feasible.

The principal city is Newcastle-upon-Tyne, with the largest city in terms of population being Sunderland. As well as its urban centres, the region is also noted for the richness of its natural beauty, which includes National Parks and coastline, as well as its historic importance and two World Heritage Sites.

With a regional economy of £38.8bn, the North-East has the lowest GDP/capita in England. With a per capita GDP at 80 per cent of the EU average, the North East of England is particularly challenged by the decline of traditional industries and a weak enterprise base. On 10 December 2007, the European Commission approved a Regional Operational Programme for the North East of England for the period 2007–13. The Operational Programme falls within the framework laid out for the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective and has a total budget of around €750 million. Community investment through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) amounts to some €375 million, which represents approximately 3.5 per cent of the total EU investment in the United Kingdom under the Cohesion Policy 2007–13 (European Commission, 2007).

The shipbuilding and coal mining industries that once dominated the area suffered a terrible decline during the second half of the twentieth century. With the help of the EU's Operational Programme, as well as national schemes and programmes, the area is now re-inventing itself as an international centre of art and culture, scientific research, technology and popular nightlife. Northumberland and County Durham, both being largely rural, base much of their economies on farming and tourism. These programmes aim to make a difference by enhancing competitive and innovative businesses, supporting the research base and helping enterprises to exploit the scientific strength of the regional research institutions. The programme aims equally to enhance the economic performance of the weakest communities in the region.

THE COMPANY

In the 1970s, three enterprising men founded new businesses in the village of Esh Winning in County Durham. Tony Carroll and Jack Lumsden formed Lumsden & Carroll Construction and Michael Hogan formed Deerness Fencing. By the 1990s, Jack and Tony had recruited Brian Manning (now Chief Executive), Andrew Pickett (now Finance Director), Fred Gressman and Steve Bass. In the mid-1990s, the businesses were merged to create what has become 'the largest indigenous construction company operating in the North East of England' – the Esh Group.

Although not explicitly a corporate mission, 'Leading the Way in Constructing the Region' is at the heart of the Esh culture. It is a statement repeated in various forms of corporate communications and features prominently and prevalently on the website. Similarly, 'the largest indigenous construction group operating in the North East of England', pride in their local beginnings, is reiterated throughout.

> *Our roots are firmly in the region. Group headquarters are sited within a few miles of our original home in the village of Esh Winning. Our founder directors continue to be actively involved and we have a rich tradition of 'growing our own'; many of our senior team first joined as trainees and apprentices and we continue to recruit and nurture young people.*
>
> (Brian Manning, CEO)

The Esh vision statement echoes the same message of responsibility and commitment and identifies their key stakeholder priorities.

> *We see construction as dynamic, exciting and rewarding. We are passionate about continuing to progress and develop; delivering satisfaction and reward to our clients, our people, the public we serve and the region in which we live, work and play.*
>
> (www.eshgroup.co.uk)

Esh Group currently employs over 1,000 people and in the last five years, turnover has more than trebled to over £150m in 2007. In keeping with their stated commitment to the local economy, Esh Group spent over £109 million with suppliers and staff in the North East region (£87 million supplier spend), with over £51 million within County Durham (£40 million supplier spend).

It is not surprising then, that in 2003, when the Group left their humble beginnings in the village of Esh Winning and relocated to their new corporate headquarters, Esh House in Bowburn, that they felt a sense of responsibility to the community they were leaving behind, as one of its largest employers.

The Initiatives

COMMUNITY

Esh has continued their sponsorship of Esh Winning Football Club, as a means of maintaining commercial and social links with their home village of Esh Winning for the five years since the move. Esh's first non-philanthropic CSR initiative, 'Fit for Employment', was launched in 2004. It is a work-related learning programme for young people about to leave school. The scheme was launched at a local school, Deerness Valley Comprehensive, with a larger than average number of graduates falling into the NEET group (not in further education, employment or training). The programme provides meaningful work experience to Year 10 and 11 students and is designed to get them 'work ready', with the promise of a full-time job to 20 per cent of the participants if they complete the entire programme and achieve five GCSEs. To date, since its inception, 70 young people have been employed on a full-time basis by Esh Group and over 600 students have participated in the intensive work experience programmes.

Anne Lakey, Head Mistress of Deerness Valley, now called Durham Community Business College, talks passionately about the impact the Fit for Employment scheme has had on her school.

> *Initially, there was some resistance from the School, as it is actually quite disruptive to timetabling to have different groups of 10 students out of classes for one week at a time and there was a fear that it would negatively affect student performance. On the contrary, it has had the exact opposite effect! At our school, truancy has almost ceased as young people see real value in attending. GCSE results, measured by both quantity and quality of grades achieved, have improved by over 10 per cent. The percentage of students staying in education and training or gaining proper employment has risen from 75 per cent to a staggering 98 per cent; that means the horrendous percentage of 25 per cent of students who 'dropped out' has been reduced*

to barely two per cent, in just three years. One senior member of staff still refers to it as 'the magic dust that was sprinkled on our students'.

In 2005, having become involved with the Government's agenda on 'worklessness', Esh developed 'Fit for Employment Again'. Worklessness, a term that applied to a range of people with a range of issues, is often associated with disadvantage, and costs the North East alone approximately £2.5 billion per year (Office for National Statistics, 2008). To date, Esh Group has worked exclusively with those with multiple disadvantages. The programme started with over 40 participants – ex offenders, ex-drug users, long-term unemployed and those with a combination of these and other personal issues.

The concept was simple. Esh Group wanted a new NVQ Level 2 (equivalent to five GCSEs) in conjunction with a regional college, to be delivered in 26 weeks, rather than the standard two years, to the participants, in order to get them 'work ready', that is, qualified, trained and motivated. This required engagement with and support from a variety of stakeholders of the various local councils, the North East Employers Coalition and in particular, Job Centre+, who were required to exercise discretion and flexibility with the Benefits System.

After an induction period, the numbers were reduced to the 16 who started their NVQ. Ten eventually completed the course and qualified, obtaining CSCS cards, which allowed them access to employment on construction sites across the country. seven of these were employed by the Esh Group.

The following year, Tyneside Cyrenians, a charity that provides shelter and support for homeless people, needed an extension to their premises in Newcastle. Esh bid for the construction work on these premises, and then offered to reduce the tendered amount if the Cyrenians provided some of their people to carry out the works. In addition to being paid for the work, they would also be offered training and mentoring to enable them to complete an NVQ Level 2 similar to the Fit for Employment Again scheme.

13 candidates started the programme which created so much local interest that it was featured on the BBC's Look North programme three times as it followed the progress of the candidates. By Esh standards of delivering tangible results, the scheme was another success story. The Cyrenians have their building; seven 'self-builders' completed the scheme and qualified; two 'graduates' were employed by the Esh Group. Five 'graduates' were subsequently employed by Tyneside Cyrenians as the maintenance team for their property portfolio.

The project aimed to give service users real work experience and a life changing opportunity. The skills developed by the participants proved to be the key to a new life and helped them to 'get back on track' by giving them a sense of pride, raised self-esteem and a realistic chance of future employment. Tyneside Cyrenians have since established their own training centre to develop further clients and continue training for their 'graduates'.

Future Business Magnates

As a result of the close relationship with Durham City Local Strategic Partnership and Brian Manning's Chairmanship of the Economic Regeneration Group, 'Future Business Magnates' was born. This year-long competition, the first year of which was launched by Sir Bobby Robson in September 2005, involved eight schools in and around Durham City.

Each school worked closely with a different company based nearby in a competition to find the 'Future Business Magnates' of the North East.

A team from Esh Group worked with a group of Year 8 students at Fyndoune Community College on their plans to create a healthy eating retail operation and campaign. Regional newspaper, The Northern Echo, ran updates on the challenges facing the teams and printed League Tables after each submission was judged. The competition has fired young peoples' imaginations, encouraged competitiveness between the schools, fostered great links between them and the businesses involved and raised awareness among parents and staff of the opportunities of enterprise and business. The Fyndoune Community College Team, mentored by Esh Group, were the first winners of this competition in 2006. This innovative project has now completed its third year and a team from Dunelm Property Services, is currently partnered with pupils from Park View School in Chester-le-Street.

ESH CHARITABLE TRUST

In November 2005, the Esh Group announced it had established a Charitable Trust worth £1million. 'The Esh Charitable Trust' would run for at least five years during which time the Group intended to donate approximately £200,000 annually into the Charity. The Trust was intended to reflect the culture and values of the company; that of a local business which cares about its people, its community, its marketplace and its region. Given that reinvestment, in the North East was a long-standing principle at the Esh Group, it was now putting its money where its mouth was.

The specific objectives of the Charity would be to fund 'good causes' in the North of England such as:

- environmental work – including protection, education and awareness;
- provision of skills and training to young people and disadvantaged people;
- supporting local communities.

A range of different awards values have been made annually since the Trust's establishment. To date (2007), the Trust has awarded £274,377 [£117,452 (2006) £136,925 (2007)] in support of a number of projects throughout the North East.

Austin Donohoe, non-executive chairman of the Esh Group, explained the motivation:

> *The Trust is a structured way of reinvesting in the community – a fulfilment of the vision and commitment we have, both as a business and as individuals, for our region. Our ambition is that this Charitable Trust will underpin and further the efforts of those who share our ideals and principles. Construction is not usually regarded as glamorous – but we at Esh know how essential, exciting and rewarding our efforts can be. It would be nice to think that this character could be reflected in the projects which are chosen for support by the Trust – a champion for unsung heroes perhaps?*

Grow with Esh

In 2007, the Trust launched a flagship project designed to instigate a wide range of positive outcomes using the focus of a horticultural project in schools across the region. Through

'Grow with Esh', £20,000 was distributed between 20 middle and secondary schools from Northumberland to Teesside and westward towards Hexham and Weardale, and £5,000 prize money was shared between the four prize-winning schemes.

The scheme was a great success: innovative school learning was promoted, derelict school environs were rejuvenated, community links were forged and commercial social enterprises established. In early 2008, the project was promoted to over 800 primary schools in the region, with the competing cohort of 20 schools based as far afield as Cornhill on Tweed in the North and Saltburn on Sea in the South.

ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH AND SAFETY

Prior research into social and environmental reporting suggests that industry membership appears to be significantly related to the type of disclosure, with employee information being most important in industries where health and safety considerations have traditionally been issues of concern, that is, cement and ceramic production (see, for example, Belal, 2001; Rizk et al., 2008), with employee assistance programmes, absenteeism and turnover, and health promotion all being significantly related to industry membership.

It is also noted by the literature (for example, Imam, 2000; Deegan, 2002) that environment-related disclosure tended to be concerned with favourable social performance, such as energy conservation and recycling rather than with activities detrimental to the environment and organisational legitimacy, that is, pollution emissions and governmental fines or non-compliance penalties. Furthermore, 94 per cent of disclosure was purely descriptive and six per cent was non-financially quantified. No disclosure was financially quantified. As suggested by Ingram and Frazier (1983) and supported over the years by numerous empirical studies, descriptive information is monitored and controlled less rigorously than financial information, indicating that managers have considerable choice as to the environmental information they wish to disclose.

The following section briefly overviews a few Environmental, Health and Safety initiatives at Esh.

Environmental Policy

Esh are currently working towards the achievement of the stringent environmental standard of ISO 14001 for all companies within the Group. Several employees have achieved NVQ Level 4 in Environmental Management and every aspect of the business and operations are continuously being examined. Purchasing and operational strategies and policies for both site and office activities are scrutinised and amended as necessary; waste management, energy and resource utilisation are rigorously reviewed and revised in light of the stated commitment to the objectives of long-term sustainability and carbon neutrality.

Bardon Esh Recycling, a joint venture company, ensures that 80 per cent of waste materials from the various Esh sites are recycled, as well as recycling 70,000 tonnes from other construction companies across the region. The recycling plant is located on Teesside, where materials are sorted then re-used directly or recycled and used in new processes. The volumes of green waste which Sones Landscaping generates are composted and re-used on landscaping projects.

Introduction of Sustainable Energy Companies

Esh Energy was launched in early 2008 as a joint venture company between Michael Hogan and Esh Group. The business will explore and develop opportunities for sustainable energy generation. The formation and development of a company which focuses on wind power energy generation, Pure Renewable Energies, at the beginning of 2008 is a key first move in this strategy. Green Energies, a specialist plumbing company involved in developing green technology and installing environmentally-sound systems, joined the Group in 2008 as a subsidiary of Bartram Walker.

The new national standard for sustainable design and construction of new homes was launched in December 2006. The code rates the home as a whole by measuring its sustainability against nine categories of design. The code uses a one to six star rating system to communicate the overall sustainability performance of a new home and sets minimum standards for energy and water use at each level. It is intended to provide information to home buyers and to offer developers a tool with which to measure performance.

Mindful of the changing marketplace, green agenda and energy supplies and pricing, we will be seeking considerable synergy throughout the Group between Esh Energy, Green Energies and Dunelm Homes' sustainable housing project and beyond.

Health and Safety Policy

Throughout the Esh Group, the management of risk, the prevention of accidents and the avoidance of ill health are crucial. Promoting and disclosing safe working practices and the maintenance of a safe working environment at all times, is paramount in this industry sector. Esh have developed a measure of health, safety and environmental Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) using a scoring system from one to five. This is derived from site inspections and differs from the three core areas of construction activities, supporting documentation and environmental issues. Site inspections measure how well project teams are implementing health and safety management as the inspections are based on observations of what is physically happening on site. The three reporting areas are maintained separately to ensure that any weaknesses are recognised immediately and that effort and resources are directed to where they are required.

In 2006, Esh Group were awarded the Young Apprenticeship pilot programme to develop the new BTech qualification in Construction and the Built Environment. Esh has delivered new insights into the process as the first organisation which is not a school, college or training provider to be awarded this type of scheme. CITB Construction Skills and the Health & Safety Executive have also supported the programme, helping to find practical solutions for young people experiencing real situations in a hazardous industry.

The Motivation

It is a matter of debate as to whether the policies in place at Esh regarding the Environment and Health and Safety are truly voluntary. The industry is a highly regulated one with stringent standards in regards to environmental management and employment standards. There is little disagreement, however, that the community-based initiatives and schemes

developed by Esh are as innovative and commendable as the statistics are sobering: 4.35m people in workless households, including 1.8m children. Is that the motivation...simple altruism? Not according to senior executives at Esh.

> *Let's consider the industry we are in..Construction – not a sexy industry, not the industry you want your child to join, perhaps? Well it's a wide and diverse industry with lots of opportunities and a great many career paths available. Some of these paths do not require 'brain surgeons' and do not require qualifications that are beyond the reach of many ... the industry needs leaders, professionals, senior and junior managers, craftsmen/tradesmen, labour and support staff. Like most industries, it has high qualifications at one end and lower qualifications at the other end. And from the work we have done on Fit for Employment Again, it is clear that a mixture across the spectrum, that for a multitude of reasons, have ended up 'labelled'. So perhaps there is something here for our industry, not to provide the main source of new recruits, but another net to cast. I'm not going to pretend it is easy, I don't think it's for every contractor, certainly at this time it may limit a company's work opportunities. It is only one of a number of ways you can recruit. Probably one of the hardest, but worklessness is a societal issue, an expensive one that requires the support of many different groups and organisations if we are going to tackle it.*
>
> (Phil Young, Director of Customer Services)

Reiterating the message of the 'business case' or enlightened self-interest, Brian Manning, CEO adds:

> *It's not altruism. We are acutely aware of our responsibilities to our employees and our region, but there are commercial reasons why this makes sense for us. It works both ways. We seek to empower individuals so that they work confidently to support our corporate aims and objectives and that they in turn are fulfilled and invigorated by association with our company.*
>
> (Brian Manning, CEO)

Awards and Awareness

The unique range of heartfelt, home grown CSR initiatives, collectively termed 'Esh Added Value', quickly caught the attention of a wide range of organisations from academia and business to government and media. In 2005 alone, Esh Group received two Big Tick Awards from Business in the Community (BiTC), media coverage on the BBC and local press and an awards ceremony dinner at 10 Downing Street for the work done with Fit for Employment, referred to by then Prime Minister Tony Blair as 'the mother of innovation' in CSR schemes.

Since its inception, Esh Group has had an active policy of procurement in the North East and adjacent regions, recognising the impact this has on the local economy, not only in terms of employment, but also the size of its carbon footprint. It is widely held that in a rural county, such as Durham, local trading and CSR have significant regional economic impact, but it is a matter of academic and practitioner debate as to what that impact is and how best to measure it (see, for example, Sacks, 2002; MMU, 2004). In 2007, wanting to

maintain and develop further its position as a leader in local trading and CSR assist other companies in following suit, Esh embarked on a two-year research project in conjunction with Durham Business School. The project aims to develop and implement a model for business engagement and to demonstrate the value of trading locally, encompassing public and private sector procurement and corporate social responsibility via:

- auditing public sector and other large customer procurement practices;
- reviewing tendering processes at Esh Group;
- liaising with local organisations on the development and progress of the LM3 North East Delivery Programme including work with Durham City Council on defining the local multiple;
- investigating the role of CSR locally, it's contribution to the local economy and how to influence others to adopt best CSR practices;
- benchmarking Esh Group against other comparable organisations (CSR and LM3);
- developing, piloting and implementing a replicable model for local procurement;
- working with supply chain to introduce best practices;
- providing evidence of the local multiple.

It is anticipated that the project will result in the following tangible benefits for the Group:

- increased business from local sources through partnership working;
- improved assessment of local economic impact through use of LM3;
- improved understanding of local authority procurement practices;
- increased understanding of the benefits of CSR;
- efficient tendering processes to be developed;
- improved relationships with supply chain and customers;
- improved company profile through increased recognition for CSR initiatives and local leadership on CSR.

The Challenges Ahead

Construction in the UK accounts for just over five per cent of UK Gross Value Added (GVA). In 2002, output from the industry in the UK was estimated at £83.6 billion according to the DTI. The output of new work and repair, maintenance & improvement (RM&I) is divided into ten key sectors. New work accounts for 53 per cent of construction with RM&I the remaining 47 per cent. The largest type of construction work is commercial activity which accounts for 19 per cent of output, followed by private housing RM&I and private non-residential RM&I. Public sector construction activity accounts for 24 per cent of output whilst housing related activity accounts for 36 per cent.

Looking at new work specifically enables a breakdown of activity by three sectors – residential building, non-residential building and civil engineering. Non-residential activity accounts for 56 per cent of new work and was valued at £22.6 billion in 2001. Residential activity accounts for 26 per cent and was valued at £10.2 billion and civil engineering accounts for 18 per cent and valued at £7.1 billion. Total employment in the

construction industry was 1.537 million in 2001 of which, just under 1 million workers, or 63 per cent were employees with the remaining third self-employed (Blake et al., 2004).

There were 168,123 contractors operating in the construction industry in 2001 according to the DTI. The majority of firms in the industry are extremely small. Forty six per cent of contracting firms have one employee while 75 per cent of firms have three employees or less. Britain, by developed country standards, has a relatively small number of construction firms operating in the industry. It is worth noting that this is a slight underestimate as the DTI includes only those companies registered for VAT. The ABI, which covers firms registered for VAT and PAYE, estimated there were 192,400 firms in 2001. The industry is characterised by a large number of small firms and very few large firms, with around 90 per cent of firms classed as micro, employing less than ten workers, as shown in Table 38.1 below. While micro firms account for the majority of enterprises, they typically account for around a third of employment. Large firms in the UK, on the other hand, account for 20 per cent of employment.

The DTI makes an adjustment for sub-contracting to ensure no double count in calculating output shares by organisation size. In 2001, the share of output accounted for by micro firms in the UK was 26 per cent compared with a 34 per cent share of employment. This suggests that micro firms are less productive than large firms.

Table 38.1 Size of UK construction firms

Number and % of Contractors by Employment Size Band in 2001		
Employment Band	**Number**	**%**
1	77,926	46.35
2-3	50,653	30.13
4-7	22,455	13.36
8-13	8,044	4.78
14-24	4,920	2.93
25-34	1,782	1.06
35-59	999	0.59
60-79	354	0.21
80-114	304	0.18
115-299	433	0.26
300-599	129	0.08
600-1199	68	0.04
1200 and over	56	0.03
Total	**168,123**	**100**

Source: adapted from Blake et al. (2004); DTI Construction Economics and Statistics.

Gross output data breaks new construction activity into three main sectors – residential, non-residential and civil engineering. UK construction is much less dependent on housing activity than its European counterparts, such as France and Germany. Conversely, non-residential building which includes commercial, industrial and public (non-housing) construction is relatively more important in the UK, accounting for 56 per cent of new work. In France, for example, non-residential construction accounts for around a third of construction output. Over the past 20 years the share of new non-residential work of total new work for the UK has varied from 42 per cent to 60 per cent. The rise and fall in the non-residential sector's share is a function of a number of factors – the health of the economy at large and thus demand for the three main types of building in the private commercial sector – offices, retail, and leisure, government investment in public buildings such as health and education facilities, and the strength or otherwise of the housing sector (Blake et al., 2004). Civil engineering output accounts for around a fifth of construction in the UK.

'Esh Added Value', with all the innovative schemes that it encompasses, was furthered and promoted for all the right reasons, long before anyone at the Esh Group had heard the term CSR. It is core to their business, true to their vision and it made financial sense. The raised profile and increased awareness, combined with the challenges of surviving the current economic climate in one of the hardest hit sectors will be the true test of just how committed to the CSR agenda the Esh Group really is. In hard times, if forced to choose between bottom line and virtue, which will win out? Only time will tell.

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Appendix: Esh Group Timeline

Source: www.eshgroup.co.uk